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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 004127

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SHAKE-UP RUMORED IN EGYPTIAN PRO-GOVERNMENT PRESS
AFTER MUBARAK INTERVIEW FLAP

REF: CAIRO 3767

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1. (SBU) Summary: An unprecedented "correction" in the pro-government Al Ahram newspaper has sparked a tense stand-off between ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) Secretary General Safwat El Sherif and pro-government Al

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Ahram Editor-in-chief Ibrahim Nafei. The correction to a report on a Kuwait news interview with President Mubarak came at the request of the presidency, which reportedly objected to the inclusion of two statements -- one concerning the Muslim Brotherhood and one concerning heir-apparent Gamal Mubarak. Since the May 15 correction was printed (reftel), rumors have circulated that Sherif has threatened "big changes" in the pro-government press. Sherif's threat may be an attempt to keep the pro-government media in line ahead of this fall's elections. End Summary.

2. (SBU) At the reported request of the presidency, Al Ahram printed on May 15 an unprecedented "correction" on its report of President Mubarak's interview with Kuwaiti daily Al Siyassa. The newspaper backed away from two comments it had reported as made by President Mubarak during the interview: 1) that Mubarak was "awake" to alleged USG-Muslim Brotherhood (MB) dialogue and 2) that his son Gamal, "like an Egyptian citizen," could now run for president. Mohammed Basha, a managing editor at Al Ahram, told a PA officer that palace officials were anxious about Mubarak's comments on USG-MB dialogue, given that PM Nazif was in the U.S. at the time, and feared that the comment about Gamal implied Mubarak's endorsement of his son for the presidency.

3. (SBU) According to a Ministry of Information official, the Al Ahram "correction" was not the newspaper's fault, but rather the result of "sloppy performance by the new Minister of Information." Basha backed up this opinion when he told a PA officer that Al Ahram never received the interview's text through official channels, and so, with a deadline approaching, the newspaper simply took the text of the interview from Al Siyassa's website. The alternative -- not reporting on the President's interview -- was not an option.

4. (SBU) Basha blamed the bureaucratic snafu on the failure of Minister of Information Anas El Fekki to appoint a Director of the State Information Service, who would normally be in charge of presidential interviews. "If someone had been in charge of the President's interviews, then none of this would have happened," stated Basha. "But Al Ahram was blamed -- not the government!" (Note: El Fekki appointed Nasser Ahmed Kamel as Director of the State Information Service on May 20. Kamel, a career ambassador who served in Washington with former FM Ahmed Maher, worked as the head of the African bureau at MFA before assuming his new position. End note.)

5. (SBU) According to several press contacts, Al Ahram Editor-in-chief Ibrahim Nafei (Note: Nafei has been a close confidant of and widely-considered mouthpiece for Mubarak. End note) criticized El Fekki, following the Al Ahram "correction," in private for being "inexperienced and unreliable." Formerly the Minister of Youth and Sport, El Fekki was named Minister of Information February 2005 after a six-month tenure by Mamdouh El Beltagui. NDP Secretary General Safwat El Sherif had been the long-running Minister of Information until July 2004, and he sponsored and supported El Fekki as the new Minister of Information.

6. (SBU) Upon hearing Nafei's comments, Sherif fired back publicly in criticism aimed at the "gray-haired old guard" in political parties and the national press who were "against reform." Nafei then responded indirectly in a column on May 24, writing that "dialogue is better than bad language."

7. (SBU) This back and forth between Sherif and Nafei has sparked rumors within press circles that "big changes" would come to the pro-government newspapers -- a threat

reportedly made privately by Sherif himself. However, a palace official reported to PA FSN on May 26 that "it would be illogical to change horses during the race," implying that with elections coming up later this year, it was not the time for a shake-up of the government press. Likewise, an editor with pro-government October magazine (circulation: 25,000), Mohamed Al Masry, who works closely with NDP members of Parliament, reported to PA FSN on May 26 that changes would likely come after the elections. "Some people have long memories," stated Al Masry.

18. (SBU) Comment: Sherif's reported threat of reprisals against a media giant such as Ibrahim Nafei was likely meant as a warning to all pro-government newspaper editors to follow the party line leading up to this year's elections -- or else. Sherif's threat might also be personal, directed against Nafei himself, given Nafei's questioning of Sherif protege El Fekki's ability. End comment.

GRAY